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ABSTRACT

For those analyzing oral interpretation performance, the theory of Symbolic Interactionism can be used to explain two interrelated phenomena that occur during the performance: expanded understanding of the text (emergent meaning) and expanded understanding of oneself (development of the self-concept). George Herbert Mead, a founder of Symbolic Interactionism, felt that the full meaning of communication emerged in the act of communication itself, and that communication was significant when the speaker was affected in the same way as the listener. Meaning in communication emerged from the gesture initiating the act, the responding gesture, and the completed social act. Both the activities of emergent meaning and development of self-concept can be seen to occur during oral interpretation preparation and performance. For the reader, the first stage in the emergence of meaning occurs in textual analysis. The interpreter uses his or her ability to decenter in seeking the perspective of the speaker of the literature rather than relying on his or her personal point of view. The speaker in the literature becomes the significant other with whom the interpreter is first involved. In rehearsals the reader extends this experience into an interaction with a prospective audience, while in performance the emergence of meaning is completed with a real audience. That completes the conversation of gestures, and the real audience becomes the final significant other. Furthermore, for active rather than passive audiences, that same emergence of meaning comes about. They also experience the perspective of another and in so doing expand their own sense of self. (HOD)

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THE EMERGENCE OF MEANING DURING THE OCCASION OF PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Explication of the text is ordinarily considered to be the function of oral interpretation, but meaning is most often viewed as something to be discovered and conveyed rather than something that emerges during the total transaction of analysis and performance. For those analyzing performance the theory of Symbolic Interactionism is applied here to explain two interrelated phenomena which occur during oral interpretation performance: expanded understanding of the text (emergent meaning) and expanded understanding of oneself (development of the self concept).

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THE EMERGENCE OF MEANING DURING THE OCCASION OF PERFORMANCE

Articles by Rosenblatt¹, Roloff², Langellier³, and Loxley⁴ in recent issues of Literature in Performance, along with the performance focus of part of the November 1983 Oral Interpretation Pre-Conference on "Issues for the '80's" at the SCA Convention in Washington, suggest that scholars in oral interpretation are broadening their interests from what recently has seemed to be almost exclusive concern with textual analysis. For those analyzing performance the theory of Symbolic Interactionism can be used to explain two interrelated phenomena which occur during an oral interpretation performance: expanded understanding of the text (emergent meaning) and expanded understanding of oneself (development of the self-concept).

Explication of the text is ordinarily considered to be the function of oral interpretation⁵, but meaning is most often viewed as something to be sought, discovered, and conveyed rather than something that emerges during the total transaction of analysis and performance. (In his introduction Loxley⁶ describes this emphasis particularly well). If the development of meaning is acknowledged, it is ordinarily explained in the most general of terms; performing the literature is assumed to enhance our understanding of it, but just how this comes about is not fully explained. Furthermore, although self-confidence and personal development are sometimes included among the benefits of studying oral interpretation they also are only discussed in general and abstract statements.

Consideration of the stages in the emergence of meaning and the relationship of the emergence of such meaning and the resultant development of the self concept for reader and for audience member will lead to a better understanding of the occasion of performance. Until the performance occasion is as much studied as is the analysis of literature for performance, we as

performers, scholars, and teachers will be limited in what we do, know, and teach about the oral interpretation of literature.

This paper considers relevant aspects of the theory of Symbolic Interactionism and extends them into oral interpretation to account for 1) the emergence of meaning through the analysis and performance of literature, and 2) the development of the self as a result of decentering in those transactions.

George Herbert Mead⁷, a founder of Symbolic Interactionism, felt human beings to be unique because they alone of all animals could be affected by their own communication. Because they were such skillful users of language symbols, they could decenter or separate themselves from their words and thus understand the effect those words might have on others. By responding to his or her communications as members of the society would respond, an individual's self concept was developed, built up by the internalization of the responses of others to the behavior and made possible by the decentering of the self through language symbols.

Mead's theory of social psychology concerned itself heavily with meaning and communication. Mead saw communication as providing the means whereby mind develops, thus distinguishing human beings from other animals. Human beings can be affected by their own "gestures" (communications) because they can take the role of another, or of society, in response to them. Animals apparently lack this ability, and thus their conversation takes place by "non-significant gestures," and a kind of stimulus-response. A gesture may be made and responded to (one dog may bare teeth and the second turn and run) but this is a secondary, lower level communication that can be superceded in human beings by what Mead calls the "significant gesture" or "significant speech."

"In the conversation of gestures what we say calls out a certain response in another and that in turn changes our own action, so that we shift from what we started to do because of the reply that the other makes. In the conversation o' gestures is the

beginning of communication. The individual comes to carry on a conversation of gestures with himself (sic). He says something that calls out a certain reply in himself which makes him change what he was going to say. One starts to say something, we will presume an unpleasant something, but when he starts to say it he realizes it is cruel. The effect on himself of what he is saying checks him, there is a conversation of gestures between the individual and himself. By significant speech we mean that the action is one that affects the individual himself and that the effect upon the individual himself is part of the intelligent carrying out of the conversation with others.⁸

Mead's own view of meaning in communication is of particular concern. Mead sees meaning as emerging during the communication act. In his words:

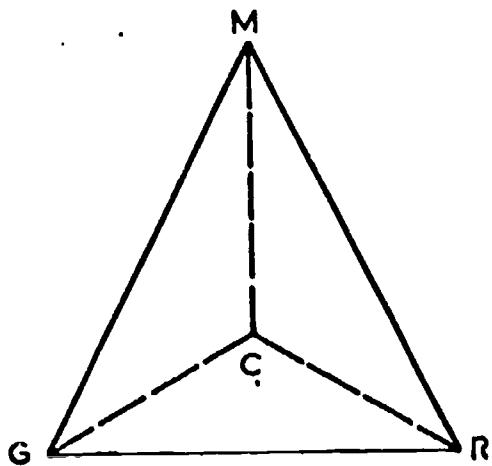
Meaning arises and lies within the field of the relationship between the gestures of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture.⁹

also:

Much subtlety has been wasted on the problem of the meaning of meaning. It is not necessary, in attempting to solve this problem, to have recourse to psychical states, for the nature of meaning, as we have seen, is found to be implicit in the structure of the social act, implicit in the relationship among its three basic individual components: namely, in the triadic relationship of a gesture of one individual, a response to that gesture by a second individual, and the completion of the given social act initiated by the gesture of the first individual.¹⁰

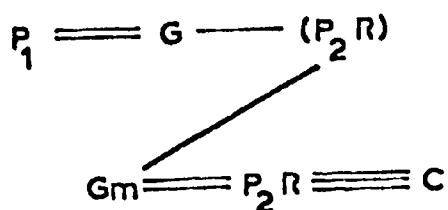
In other words, the individual sees her or his communication through the eyes of another and realizes that a modification might be necessary in order to achieve the desired response.

The full meaning of the communication thus emerges in the act of communication itself, and the communication is significant when the speaker is affected in the same way that the listener is. Meaning in communication emerges from the gesture initiating the act, the responding gesture, and the completed social act. It could be represented by the figure of a pyramid:



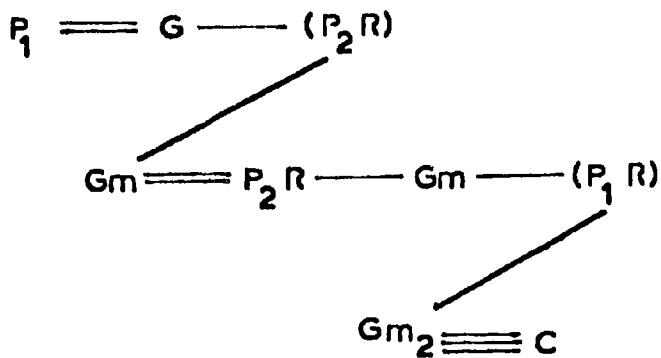
G = gesture
R = responding gesture
C = completed social act
M = meaning

In another form:



In more familiar language, a person initiates a social act with a gesture or communication behavior; he or she then anticipates or makes a projected response of the second person to the communication by taking the other's role; on the basis of what has been learned he or she modifies the gesture so that the second person's response will complete the act in a manner closer to the desired response. The original meaning has been extended and a more complete meaning emerges during the act of communication; in addition, the self has developed by the act of decentering and taking the role of the other.

Mead's model has been extended to involve the second party more fully in the act of emergent meaning¹¹. A person initiates an act with a gesture, then makes a projected response in the role of the other, modifying the gesture as needed; the responding person observes the gesture (now modified) and considers its meaning by means of a similar act of projection, then modifies his or her interpretation to complete the act and include the newly added meaning of the gesture.



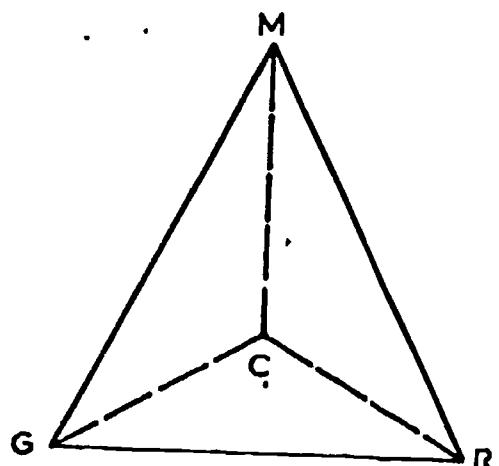
Thus in fully human communication, both parties consider not only their own meanings but also what they know about the other person. The meaning that emerges from the transaction is larger than either individual meaning. One's own understanding of the meaning of an event modifies and is extended and a more complete meaning for both participants emerges during the transaction. As one takes the role of the other, a sense of similarities and differences adds to one's perception of one's self. This decentering furthers the development of the self concept.

Mead argued that the individual's self-concept was socially derived, built up by the internalization of the responses that others gave to one's own behavior or "gestures." As the individual is socialized to the point that she or he understands the society, decentering or response to one's own communications as a member of the society is possible. Mead uses the terms "I" and "me" to describe the decentering. "I" describes the part of the self that acts while "me" is the part of the self that responds to the action. Decentering is made possible by the symbolic function of our language and according to Mead, Piaget¹², and others is developmentally related.

Mead observes that a child proceeds through a phase of role-playing behavior in which he or she practices the roles of significant members of society and thus is enabled to view personal behavior objectively, through the eyes

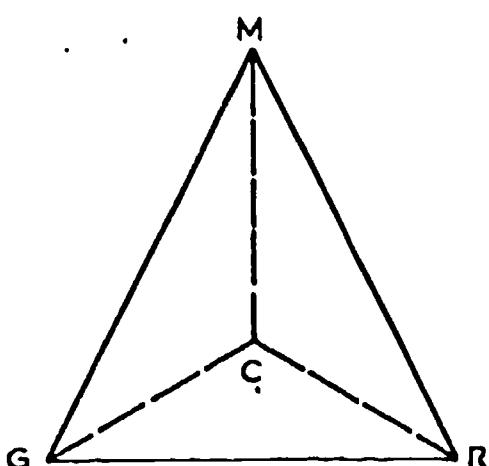
of the others. A "significant other" is one whose perspective is taken in the development of the self concept.

Both these activities of emergent meaning and development of the self-concept can be seen to occur during oral interpretation preparation and performance. For the reader, the first stage in the emergence of meaning occurs in textual analysis. The interpreter uses his or her ability to decenter in seeking the perspective of the speaker of the literature (or in some cases the perspective of the author) rather than relying on his or her personal point of view. The role playing activity of the child parallels the description of the dramatistic approach to analysis often encouraged in analysis today. In this case the speaker in the literature becomes the significant other with whom the interpreter is first involved.



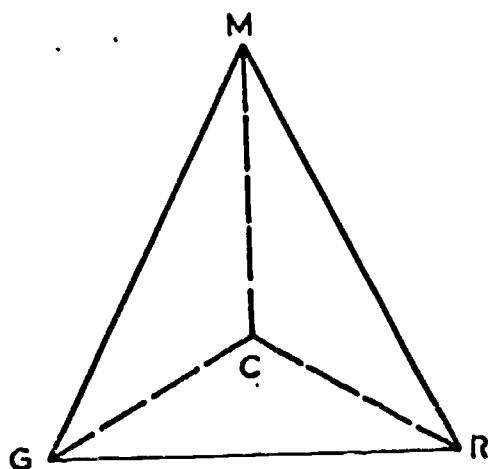
- G = initial interaction with text from personal meaning or M₁ (gesture)
- R = analysis of text by taking perspective of its speaker (responding gesture)
- C = adjustment of original meaning (completed act)
- M₂ = meaning after analysis

In rehearsals the reader extends this experience into an interaction with a prospective audience.



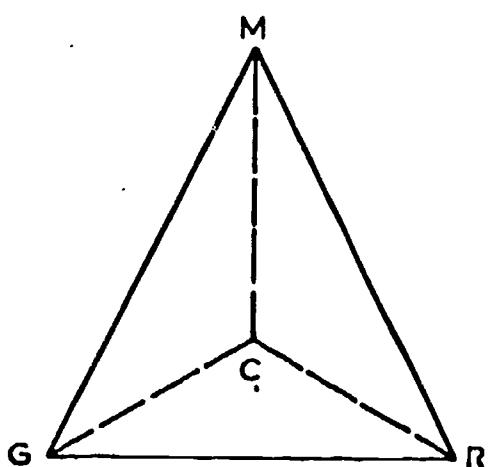
- G = rehearsal of text reflecting M₂ (gesture)
- R = consideration of performance and meaning from projected perspective of audience (responding gesture)
- C = adjustment of interpretation of text and externalization of its meaning (completed act)
- M₃ = meaning after rehearsal

In performance the emergence of meaning is completed with a real audience. That third step completes the conversation of gestures, and the real audience becomes the final significant other. Meaning for the reader fully emerges only in the performance occasion.



G = performance of the text's meaning as now modified or M₃ (gesture)
R = audience response to performed test (responding gesture)
C = adjustment of performance and further enlargement of meaning based on audience response (completed act)
M₄ = emergent meaning for reader

Furthermore, for active rather than passive audiences, who engage themselves in the performance occasion, the same emergence of meaning comes about. They engage in a conversation of "gestures" with first of all the reader, seeking to understand the reader's meaning as distinct from their own; and also interact with the speaker in the literature, distinguishing the meaning of the speaker of the literature itself. In so doing, their ability to decenter, to take the role of the other, affects their understanding of these other perspectives. In addition, by the act of decentering their own meaning is extended and a more fully developed meaning emerges. Furthermore, they have experienced the perspective of another and in so doing have expanded their own sense of self.



G = response to selection as performed or M₁ (gesture)
R = consideration of meaning of performance by taking perspectives of selection and reader (responding gesture)
C = adjustment of original meaning (completed act)
M = meaning after analysis or M₂

Such a theoretical approach is not entirely new. Many authors speak of the need to empathize with the voices in the literature. Rude¹³ and more recently Bakhtin¹⁴ refer to dialogue and dialectic in considering meaning. Ecroyd and Wagner¹⁵ stated "that which is understood from what the original writer intended is mutually developed at the moment it is spoken and heard." Peterson¹⁶ refers to ways to make the audience more than a voyeur or receptacle of performance and Langellier¹⁷ has begun to explore a phenomenological approach to audience. Consideration of the audience in oral interpretation begins to raise questions about the nature of performance and the development of meaning within the performance context. Yet while these and others seek to analyze performance and have begun to consider the development of meaning, none utilizes the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism. This perspective is useful because it not only explains phenomena which are occurring but also explains them in an economic and coherent fashion and by means of an established theoretical approach.

The influence of Mead is not entirely unknown in oral interpretation. Coudas¹⁸ and Littlejohn¹⁹ both comment upon the influence of Mead on the dramatistic approach of Kenneth Burke, with Coudas relating this approach directly to oral interpretation. However, the direct application of Mead's approaches to meaning and to self concept has not been made.

In addition to providing insight into performance for performers, theorists, and teachers, Mead's theory of self concept may also be useful in explaining more fully why some performers, otherwise capable oral interpreters, have difficulty relating to their audiences. Ability and willingness to decenter and take the perspective of another may well vary among performers. In addition, willingness to self disclose may affect the perspective-sharing process involved in Mead's theory applied to oral interpretation.²⁰

A further advantage of considering the relationship of performance to meaning is the focus on the oral aspect, not merely the verbal, of oral interpretation. Dance²¹ has argued that speech is the very source of self and that spoken language both shapes and reveals self. He has cited research support for the contention that the development of an individual self and self concept is initially rooted in the act of speech and is sustained by speech communication²². Such research consideration should be extended to include communication in its various contexts, among them the occasion of performance.

The occasion of performance is only beginning to receive critical and research attention. Both theorists and researchers need to explore this aspect of our art with the enthusiasm and creativity they have shown in the analysis of the literature for performance. For nearly all of us, the joy and the purpose of oral interpretation culminate in the occasion of performance.

ENDNOTES

¹Louise M. Rosenblatt, "Act 1, Scene 1: Enter the Reader," Literature in Performance, I: 2, April 1981, pp. 13-23.

²Ieland H. Roloff, "Performer, Performing, Performance: Towards a Psychologicalization of Theory," Literature in Performance, III: 2, April 1983, pp. 13-24.

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⁴Robert B. Loxley, "Roles of the Audience: Aesthetic and Social Dimensions of the Performance Event," Literature in Performance, III: 2, April 1983, pp. 40-44.

⁵K. B. Valentine, "'New Criticism' and the Emphasis on Literature in Interpretation," in Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives, David W. Thompson, editor, New York: University Press of America, 1983, pp. 549-565.

⁶Loxley, Op. Cit., p. 40.

⁷George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self, and Society, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934; and Anselm Strauss, editor, George Herbert Mead: On Social Psychology, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.

⁸Strauss, Ibid., p. 205.

⁹Ibid., p. 163.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 169.

¹¹Bonnie W. Buzzo, "Renegotiating our Gender-Related Self Images," Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, New York City, November 1980.

¹²Jean Piaget, The Language and Thought of the Child, New York: New American Library, 1955; and in comments on Vygotsky's critical remarks in Thought and Language by Lev Vygotsky, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962.

¹³Roland Rude, "Diagnosis and Dialectic," in Studies in Interpretation, volume 1, Esther M. Doyle and Virginia Hastings Floyd, editors, Amsterdam: Rodopi NV, 1972, pp. 99-102.

¹⁴M. M. Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, cited by Mary Francis Hopkins in her book review in Literature in Performance, III: 2, April 1983, pp. 84-85.

¹⁵Donald H. Ecroyd and Hilda Stahl Wagner, Communication Through Oral Reading, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979, p. 11.

¹⁶ Eric E. Peterson, Introduction to "Symposium: The Audience in Interpretation Theory," Literature in Performance, III: 2, April 1983, p. 33.

¹⁷ Langellier, Op. Cit.

¹⁸ Fabian Gudas, "Dramatism and Modern Theories of Oral Interpretation, in Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives, David W. Thompson, editor, New York: University Press of America, 1983, pp. 589-627.

¹⁹ Stephen W. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication, Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1978, pp. 54-76.

²⁰ Bonnie W. Buzzo, "Oral Interpretation and Self Disclosure: A Speculation," Paper presented at the Central States Speech Association Convention, Chicago, April 1981.

²¹ Frank E. X. Dance, "This Above All," SCA Presidential Address given November 5, 1982, and carried in Spectra, December 1982, pp. 3-5.

²² Ibid., p. 3.